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God Bless America, Land of The Consumer: Fitzgerald's Critique of the American Dream

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Kimberly is a senior studying English and Secondary Education. This paper was kindly mentored by

Professor Kimberly Chabot Davis and was originally written for the senior seminar course: *Gender, Race, and American Modernism* in the fall semester of 2010. After graduation in May of 2011, Kimberly plans to pursue a career in education.

In James Truslow Adams' book, *The Epic of America*, he defines the American dream as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (404). In the middle of the roaring 1920's, author F. Scott Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby*, examining the fight for the American dream in the lives of his characters in New York. Fitzgerald illustrates for the reader a picture of Gatsby's struggle to obtain the approval and acceptance of high society and to earn the same status. Jay Gatsby travels the journey to achieve the American dream, but his dream is corrupted and outside forces prevent him from ever fully attaining it. Adams' definition continues: "It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (404). This definition corresponds to what could be considered the inception of the American dream--"Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness"--which were dubbed unalienable rights in the Declaration of Independence (US 1776). Fitzgerald sets Jimmy Gatz out on the right path toward the American dream, but it is distorted by the influence of society's focus on materialism. Gatsby's materialistic way of life, however, does not win the approval and acceptance of the New York elite, or the heart of his beloved Daisy. Fitzgerald criticizes American society for depriving Gatsby of his American dream because of the country's growing obsession with consumer culture and misunderstanding of the American dream as a culmination of wealth.

F. Scott Fitzgerald paints a picture of the class-consciousness of America throughout the plot. He sets his story in New York, but makes clear distinctions about the economic classes of people that inhabit the area. Situated on an island off New York, East Egg and West Egg are towns that are home to a range of classes. East Egg is reserved for the elite members of the upper class born into old money. Fitzgerald describes the island through Nick Carraway's eyes: "Across the courtesy bay the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water" (5). The people that come from East Egg exude high class. Nick identifies the party guests from East Egg as Yale graduates, doctors, and people with "flipped up" noses (61-62). West Egg on the other hand, is for the imposters of sorts. West Egg is "the less fashionable of the two," as Nick puts it. The 'new money' rich live on West Egg, including Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby. West Egg is the up and coming area for the

self made millionaires and those trying to look like them. The people living in West Egg that attend Gatsby's parties include Irish people, Jewish people making money in the movies, and gamblers (62-63). Fitzgerald's sets of descriptions of the two places are very different from one another, establishing that the desirable area is East Egg based merely on the people alone.

The landscape proves to be another reason for West Egg's inferiority. The West Egg side of the island faces the city, with a desolate space in between the two. This "valley of ashes is bounded on one side by a small foul river, and, when the drawbridge is up to let barges through, the passengers on waiting trains can stare at the dismal scene for as long as a half an hour" (24). This area is next to West Egg, which has an effect on how people perceive West Egg to be less desirable than East Egg. Fitzgerald's description of the space between West Egg and New York is seemingly other-worldly:

This is a valley of ashes--a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight. (23)

Fitzgerald criticizes how the industry of the area has changed. The area may have once been the 'fantastic farm' that he writes about, but now it is ash that grows like the wheat once did and the garden is now grotesque. Fitzgerald is describing the decline of genuineness and authenticity in America, due to the harrowing effects of consumerism. This land was once thriving with life and now is dead and turned to ash. It has been consumed by consumerism. The farmers are now railroad workers, serving the transportation system of goods bought and sold in the area. The area was taken over by the budding consumerist culture and now there is nothing left. All of the temptations of the consumerist lifestyle, including houses and cars, have even burned and turned to ash. This world is not about people; consumerism is about the material things, not genuine human relationships. The people here are gray and lifeless, and have no spark to them. They merely walk through the motions of life. This scene is what Fitzgerald thinks will become of the country once it is destroyed by consumerism, like a look into the future. This novel is a cautionary tale for the people of America. The American dream is so easily corrupted by the temptations of a consumerist lifestyle. This

era was a period of change after World War I, and Fitzgerald is warning America about the direction the country could be heading in.

Fitzgerald's characters in *The Great Gatsby* live in this dynamic era and represent a range of economic classes attempting to adapt to it. The only true working class characters in the novel are the Wilsons. Fitzgerald uses them to illustrate both ends of the spectrum of the effects of consumerism on Americans. Myrtle complains about George by saying, "I married him because I thought he was a gentleman...I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn't fit to lick my shoe" (34). George lied about his economic status in order to impress her. Their marriage is not based on love or even truth; it is based on a lie about financial conditions. Myrtle laments the position she was conned into, "The only *crazy* I was was when I married him. I knew right away I made a mistake. He borrowed somebody's best suit to get married in, and never told me about it, and the man came after it one day when he was out... I gave it to him and then I lay down and cried to beat that band all afternoon" (35). Despite her working class status, Myrtle still dreams of living a privileged lifestyle like any other consumer. She thinks of herself so highly that even her husband is substandard. That greed and self-centeredness is another aspect of what Fitzgerald is warning America about. The more Americans focus on money and materials, the more they lose themselves in the process and become the gray and lifeless people Fitzgerald created to represent the future of consumerist America.

The Buchanans represent the elite upper-class from old money. They are rich, sophisticated, and very particular about the company they keep. Tom focuses on the separation of the races, as he attempts to quote "*The Rise of the Colored Empires*" by a man named Goddard (Fitzgerald 12); scholar Walter Benn Michaels points out that he mistakes this for Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (Michaels 23). Tom believes that white people need to protect the sanctity and exclusivity of the white race. Tom's ideas are not his own, but he is still commended for reading, as Daisy says in a possibly sarcastic and condescending manner, "Tom's getting very profound... He reads deep books with long words in them" (Fitzgerald 13). Ronald Berman, author of *The Great Gatsby and Modern Times*, claims that the Buchanans "connect entertainment with consumerism, and consumerism with the acquisition of character. Tom gets his ideas from books with long words in them, books that dissipate ideas under the impression that they are radiating them. In this narrative, ideas are bought and paid for" (5). I agree with Berman's argument because I believe that the characters are so enveloped in consumerism, that it is almost expected that even their basic

ideas about humanity are contaminated by it. Tom regurgitates another man's ideology and insists, "It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved" (Fitzgerald 13). Tom has no thoughts of his own in this situation; he relies on the thoughts of others that he paid for, whether it be in books with long words, newspapers, or paying a friend to do some digging into Gatsby's background. These characters, the Buchanans and the Wilsons, interact throughout the novel, but the class distinctions keep them from ever truly fitting together. Fitzgerald creates a picture of high society that looks beautiful from far away, but when examined further shows a much uglier side of high society and the way it warps the impression it exudes to the lower classes.

The desire to attain the status of high society, no matter how ugly it really is, is inherent in Jay Gatsby. Even at a young age, Jimmy Gatz had the same determination the reader sees in Jay Gatsby, before it was poisoned with consumerism. In being introduced to Mr. Gatz, the reader is also exposed to a side of Gatsby previously unknown. Even before Daisy's captivating influence, Jimmy Gatz was already a dreamer. His daily itinerary and list of "General Resolves" is reminiscent of that of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, as Walter Benn Michaels points out in his book, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (26). Mr. Gatz says, "Jimmy was bound to get ahead. He always had some resolves like this or something. Did you notice what he's got about improving his mind? He was always great for that" (173). Before he met Daisy, Jimmy Gatz had a dream of becoming something better. Jimmy Gatz was on the right path towards achieving the American dream, by way of improving his mind and working hard. It was not until he met Daisy that his dream changed; Daisy became his dream.

It is when he meets Daisy that he is led astray. Fitzgerald describes their relationship in its beginnings, establishing that Gatsby "found her excitingly desirable" (148). She was desirable, like an object to be adored. He was also fascinated by her way of life from early on in the way that her house "amazed him - he had never been in such a beautiful house before. But what gave it an air of breathless intensity was that Daisy lived there - it was as casual a thing to her as his tent out at camp was to him" (148). From that very moment, Daisy's lifestyle distorted his once genuine quest for the American dream into one for a "grail" as Fitzgerald calls it (149). He knew from the beginning that he could never have her as Jimmy Gatz. Fitzgerald refers to her as a "grail" to symbolize that the quest to win Daisy, like the Holy Grail, will never end and will ultimately be fruitless. Gatsby knew from the very start of their courtship that "he had no real right to touch her hand" (149). We understand Gatsby to be a hardworking man, kept down by society's standards defining the upper class. Jay Gatsby represents a step somewhere in the middle, between the working class and the

rich from old money. Walter Benn Michaels argues that Gatsby lost his chance with Daisy because he lacked the necessary past and family to be an acceptable suitor for Daisy despite their love for each other (26). I agree because not only is success and status linked to money in the novel, but also to breeding and background as Michaels points out. For Gatsby, the concept of the American dream was forever altered because it could no longer be achieved through hard work and determination. After Daisy's first rejection of him, Gatsby's dream centered completely on winning her back and like Daisy as the "grail," the dream is unattainable.

The reader could perceive him to be of the upper class based on his immense riches, but as the plot progresses, the mystery surrounding him leads to talk amongst his partygoers questioning his past. He is of the 'new money' upper class with a barrier much more pronounced than one might think. Being from a lower economic class than the Buchanans has an effect on how he is perceived as a human being. To most at his parties, Gatsby was the seemingly absent host, providing the luxuries of the parties, but rarely partaking in the enjoyment. Gatsby walks around his own home surrounded by strangers. Consumerism has infected Gatsby through the luxury and extravagance he feels is necessary to fit in, and win Daisy.

In order to become the man Daisy wanted, Gatsby had to transform himself and compensate for his lack of breeding. His extravagant mansion and lavish parties are all for Daisy even though she is not a part of his new life. For Gatsby, consumerism is a crutch. It masks his emotional connection to attaining his American dream. To the naked eye, he looks like any other entrepreneur, gaining popularity by throwing parties. Underneath the facade is a broken man, kept down by society's standards. Even with his surrender and subjugation to consumerism, it is not enough to gain admittance into the club he so desperately wants to join. As hinted at by many of his party guests, Gatsby made his money through questionable business transactions. Because of his quiet and mysterious demeanor, the rumors fly about his allegiances and patronage. He could be a cousin to Kaiser Wilhelm (Fitzgerald 32), or a German spy in the war (Fitzgerald 44). Most notably are the accusations Tom Buchanan makes about Gatsby's finances after learning of the affair with Daisy. Tom claims Gatsby makes his money illegally, "I found out what your 'drug-stores' were." He turned to us and spoke rapidly. 'He and Wolfsheimer bought up a lot of side-street drug stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That's one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and I wasn't far wrong'" (Fitzgerald 133). This development in the plot proves that not only is his identity fake and dishonest, but the way Gatsby makes his money is also tainted.

Despite his questionable activities, I think Fitzgerald meant for readers to feel sympathy for Gatsby. Gatsby had always been a man with a dream and people could see the genuineness in his eyes. Nick Carraway saw the goodness in him the first time the two met, describing his presence in great detail:

He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself. (48)

This moment is one of the few times that someone sees through the extravagant façade that Gatsby hides under. He may have been a bootlegger, but I argue that Fitzgerald makes the statement that society forced Gatsby into bootlegging because the American dream is not accessible to those not born into money. He was a bootlegger, but he was still just Jimmy Gatz, following his dream to get the girl. Both the economy and society of the time period prevent people from attaining high society status through hard work, so Gatsby must turn to other resources.

Historian Bret E. Carroll claims that “the lavish lifestyle of the gangster (denoted by his expensive suits and jewelry) also came to embody both the promise and pitfalls surrounding the new paths to individual fulfillment offered by consumerism” (107). Carroll argues that consumerism was seen as a way to individual fulfillment in this time period, and that thought affected not only the well known gangsters, but also a much wider audience. Carroll continues:

For instance, in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Jay Gatsby’s palatial home, fabulous parties, and expensive clothes epitomize the growth of a masculine style defined by hedonistic materialism. Gatsby’s gleaming car represents the emergence of the automobile as an archetypal symbol of the new union of consumerism with masculine independence, power and status. (107)

Carroll convincingly argues that Gatsby’s materialistic way of life is a sign of both the promise and pitfalls of consumerism. Gatsby’s material possessions are not earned honestly, but through illegal channels of commerce, yet they still give off the impression of his affluence. His riches appear to make him happy, because as a consumer, wealth brings happiness. In

the reality of Gatsby’s life, however, the riches only bring him down.

Gatsby’s car, a beautiful Rolls-Royce, is not merely a mode of transportation, but a symbol of himself. From the outside he is polished and a tad bit extravagant, but the layer under the surface is much darker. After the War, people wanted that kind of luxury, independence, and status. It was a status symbol for Gatsby. He does not own a modest Ford, but a ‘gorgeous car’ (Fitzgerald 63). The car is part of his façade of outer extravagance to hide inner insecurities. Fitzgerald chose to make the automobile, ‘the archetypal symbol’ as Carroll calls it, the messenger of death in his story. Nick Carraway remembers that “The ‘death car’ as the news papers called it, didn’t stop; it came out of the gathering darkness, wavered tragically for a moment and then disappeared around the next bend... Myrtle Wilson, her life violently extinguished, knelt in the road and mingled her thick dark blood with dust” (Fitzgerald 137). This is no accident; the automobile revolutionized American industry, coming “out of the gathering darkness” to bring new technology to the world. Its availability brought a little bit of luxury to the American people, promoting consumerism. The car is representative of Gatsby’s consumerist attitude toward status, and it ultimately ends up killing Myrtle. I believe that Fitzgerald is criticizing the road that consumerism will take America toward destruction. Gatsby’s tainted car, home, parties, and clothes represent the rise of consumerism in America and the great lengths people will travel to fit into the consumer culture no matter how dismal the journey.

Fitzgerald acknowledges the problem of obsession with consumerism not only among high society, but in the country as a whole. His representation of varied economic classes shows his understanding of mass culture and its effects across cultural boundaries. In this time period, consumerism was often associated with the idea of “mass culture.” Andreas Huyssen, author of “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” argues that, “Warding something off, protecting against something out there seems indeed to be a basic gesture of the modernist aesthetic” (2). I agree with Huyssen’s claim that modernists are concerned with mass culture and are warding it off, but in terms of applying this idea to Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby*, I disagree with Huyssen on some points. I believe Fitzgerald is taking a stand against consumerism, but does so by way of creating a cautionary tale. He does not ward off consumerism or protect his characters from it. Fitzgerald faces consumerism head on and lets his characters be consumed by it. The Buchanans, Myrtle Wilson, and Gatsby are all brought down by the effects of this mass cultural phenomenon. Huyssen continues, “The nightmare of being devoured by mass culture through co-optation, commodification, and the wrong kind

of success is the constant fear of the modernist artist, who tries to stake out his territory by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture” (7). On the one hand, his argument can be validated by applying it to Fitzgerald in terms of addressing the fears of mass culture and in this case consumerism. On the other hand, Huyssen’s argument is flawed when applying it to Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald’s underlying purpose is to warn the reader of the negative effects of consumerist culture. He submits his characters to the disastrous consequences of consumerism but lets the reader decode the purpose for himself. Fitzgerald does preach against consumerism in subtle ways by proving to the reader what happens to someone consumed by mass culture and in this case consumerism. I interpret Huyssen’s argument to mean that many modernist authors protect their characters and the public from mass culture by warding it off. Fitzgerald’s approach is more critical than Huyssen’s argument would suggest.

Modernism as a historical, cultural, and literary movement helped to define the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth as a time of change. As a reaction against the Victorian era, modernism proclaimed the importance of individuality. In categorizing Fitzgerald as a modernist writer in the 1920’s, I argue that he takes a stance against the rising consumerist culture in America. In her article on modernism and consumer culture, literary critic Alissa Karl quotes Henry Ford in his book, *Moving Forward*. “Our buying class is our working class,” Ford claimed in 1930, “and our working class must also become our ‘leisure class’ if our immense production is to be balanced by consumption. Besides, it is only just and human and progressive and educational that people should use what they produce” (qtd. in Karl 83). Henry Ford is seen as the father of mass production in America, having revitalized American industry with his invention of the Model T automobile. His words were truly influential in this time period, and they describe the era that Fitzgerald was living and writing in. Ford’s words are representative of the changes taking place in the economic class systems in America; the working class is producing more and buying more along with the upper class. More consumption leads to more production and the cycle continues. After the focus on production during World War I, the 1920’s were celebratory by way of mass consumption. Karl states that consumption “isn’t simply good for business: it is a national moral imperative” (83). Spending money and stimulating the economy was a moral responsibility in addition to a national reality. Consumerism found a way to work itself into the American dream, fooling Americans into believing that to be an American was to be a consumer.

Fitzgerald purposefully blurs the boundaries between genuine art and mass culture by creating a genuinely artistic text about

the negative influence of consumerism. Fitzgerald criticizes the consumerist view on art when Four Eyes is speaking about the books in Gatsby’s library: “Absolutely real—have pages and everything. I thought they’d be a nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact, they’re absolutely real. Pages and—Here! Lemme show you ... It’s a bona-fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me” (45). Fitzgerald is criticizing how consumerism has tainted a person’s outlook on art. Four Eyes assumes that the books are fake and serve as décor in the mansion. Literature and art in general are bought and sold and are meant to be representative of wealth. Four Eyes later gawks over the “thoroughness” and “realism” of Gatsby’s library (46). He assumes that the library is a ruse meant to convince people of his wealth and status. He never entertains the thought that these books could be for art’s sake or for the sake of learning. Fitzgerald longs for the respect for literature and art that was a staple of the past. Fitzgerald describes Gatsby’s library as a “high Gothic library, paneled with carved English oak and probably transported from some ruin overseas” (45). Gatsby’s library is reminiscent of the libraries of ancient times like at Alexandria or in Rome during the Renaissance when art was truly revered and appreciated. This is the genuine art that Fitzgerald longs for. He writes this novel hoping it to be read and respected as a piece of genuine art, not left on a shelf to represent status like Four Eyes suggests the consumers of mass culture would do.

The Great Gatsby is not only a classic piece of modernist literature, but it is a picture of life affected by consumerism and the ways one can be destroyed by it. Jimmy Gatz wanted nothing more than to have the American dream as James Truslow Adams described it. He wanted to be respected and loved for the person he was, not the family and situation he was born into. The misunderstanding of the American dream as a culmination of wealth corrupts the pure and genuine quest for self improvement Jimmy Gatz follows as a path toward achieving the dream. Jimmy Gatz falls for Daisy and her lavish lifestyle, but Jay Gatsby dies alone, with only his property and riches with him. The hundreds of partygoers do not attend his funeral because those relationships were not based on human connection. The last time Nick sees Gatsby, he remembers the first time they met: “The lawn and drive has been crowded with the faces of those who guessed at his corruption – and he had stood on those steps, concealing his incorruptible dream, as he waved them good-by” (154). Fitzgerald’s statement is clearly ironic because his dream is so corrupted by the notion that the American dream is about money and status. In the end, Gatsby has only Nick and his father to mourn him, because the consumerism of American society preached the importance of wealth and possessions rather than the richness of human contact. Fitzgerald gives us a story about the journey of the American dream, and how it can be jeopardized by the very

people who want it. Adams' definition of the American dream is based on a utopian society, while Fitzgerald tells a much more realistic story in true modernist fashion, warning us of the all-consuming power of consumer culture.

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